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SUBJECT: HAITIANS IN THE BAHAMAS: COMING THROUGH YET  
STAYING ON

REF: A. 08 NASSAU 160  
[1](#)B. 08 NASSAU 863  
[1](#)C. NASSAU 73  
[1](#)D. NASSAU 152  
[1](#)E. 08 NASSAU 711

Classified By: Charge Zuniga-Brown for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Haitians account for some 30-60,000 out of 340,000 inhabitants of The Bahamas. Societal tolerance for immigrants is decreasing from an already low benchmark due to current economic stresses, exacerbating ingrained anti-Haitian sentiments. Bahamians associate immigrants with crime, poverty, and drain on social services. Economic hardship and stricter immigration enforcement may result in increased Haitian-Bahamian tensions, possibly even inter-ethnic conflicts. Nassau neighborhoods are most at risk, but the potential exists in outlying islands as well. Barring major changes to U.S. immigration policy, which could induce more Bahamian-Haitians to pick up stakes for Florida, the country,s &Haitian problem8 is hugely delicate and here to stay. END SUMMARY.

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MIGRANT FLOW SLOWING -- BUT WAY UP FOR THE YEAR  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Illegal Haitian immigration to or through The Bahamas has subsided after a higher than normal seasonal spike during the Christmas/New Year period. According to U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) statistics, the number of interdicted Haitians in the partial statistical year-to-date (4,234) is already higher than the total for all of the previous year (3,481). It is also nearly double the year-to-date statistics for the same period last year (2,284), showing an 85 percent increase year-on-year. Nevertheless, the numbers have dropped significantly in the last three months, indicating that the bump is over as hurricane season approaches.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The flow of Haitian migrants heading to the U.S. through The Bahamas clearly increased when compared to the same period in 2008. Whether the uptick was primarily due to hurricane devastation, the global economic downturn affecting Haiti and the Caribbean, or anticipation of a change in U.S. policy toward Haitians in the U.S. is not clear.

[1](#)4. (U) In remarks to parliament March 4, the Minister of Immigration noted that about 1,300 illegal immigrants had been repatriated already to that point in the year, and 3,512 in the six months before that. The GCOB has repatriated about 6-7,000 Haitian migrants annually over the last three years, 85 percent or more of them Haitian, with Dominicans, Jamaicans, Cubans, and many other nationalities comprising the remainder (ref A).

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WHEN SMUGGLING GOES WRONG, PEOPLE DIE  
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[1](#)5. (SBU) Migrants from poorer Caribbean countries are

smuggled to or through The Bahamas, destined for the U.S., by well-established, island-hopping networks. Many are run by Bahamian smugglers based in Freeport, Grand Bahama or Bimini, two of the closest points to Florida shores. At least three apparent human smuggling cases were reported in The Bahamas in May, one involving a small group of Dominicans, the other two involving Haitians. At least 9 Haitians drowned off the Florida coast recently after a smuggling attempt from The Bahamas went wrong. This &worst-case8 scenario for such risky voyages attracted significant U.S. media attention. But it is repeated frequently in The Bahamas, albeit on a smaller scale, and with much less fanfare.

¶6. (SBU) Periodic news reports of unidentified bodies washing up on New Providence beaches suggest that Haitian migrants often meet gruesome fates. Some die at the hands of unscrupulous smugglers, who are known to force victims into the water just short of their destinations without concern for whether they can swim; others perish due to unfavorable weather or conditions. Such tragic incidents highlight the desperation of the migrants and indicate that the illicit Haitian migration flow to and through The Bahamas is unlikely to stop.

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HAITIANS ENTRENCHED THROUGHOUT ISLANDS  
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¶7. (U) The Haitian community already constitutes the largest ethnic and linguistic minority in The Bahamas. Reliable sources estimate that 30,000 - 60,000 undocumented Haitians, of a total population estimated at 340,000, may be living in The Bahamas at any one time. Haitians are settled predominantly in New Providence, Abaco, Eleuthera, and Grand

Bahamas islands. No solid population figures are available due to this community's basic transience.

¶8. (SBU) According to Haitian community representatives, many migrants who come to The Bahamas plan to eventually move on to the U.S., often through Bahamian-run smuggling networks. Those who are caught here and repatriated promptly return to The Bahamas, if they can afford it, through similar, well-functioning illicit channels from Haiti. It is not known how many stay, or make it to the U.S., or are involved in the traditional &circular migration8 of labor from Haiti to Nassau or other island destinations.

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WHAT IS A &HAITIAN8 IN THE BAHAMAS?  
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¶9. (U) It is also difficult to define the term &Haitian8 in the Bahamian context. Modern Haitian labor migration dates from the 1950s, at least, and other forms of immigration are as old as post-discovery settlement of the islands. Yet Bahamian-born children of Haitian immigrants, legal or illegal, must apply for Bahamian citizenship upon their 18th birthday, according to restrictive citizenship laws passed upon independence in 1973. The procedures for gaining citizenship are cumbersome and application windows narrow, leading to multi-year waiting times for resolution of claims.

¶10. (U) Haitian representatives credibly complain that it is nearly impossible, in practice, to achieve favorable settlement of legitimate citizenship claims. Human rights activists and limited available government figures tend to confirm this conclusion. As a result, social observers point to generations of de facto &stateless persons8, predominantly Haitian, who are poorly integrated into Bahamian society at large.

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LOW-SKILLED JOBS DRAW HAITIANS  
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¶11. (U) Historically, demand for cheap labor in a fast-developing economy drew Haitian migrant workers to low-skilled, low-paid jobs eschewed by Bahamians -- in agriculture, construction, gardening, or other domestic

services. Migrants came not only to New Providence Island, where two-thirds of Bahamians reside and the tourism industry is centered, but to smaller, outlying communities with labor needs, primarily Abaco, Eleuthera, and Freeport, Grand Bahama. All host significant Haitian migrant communities, with the proportionally largest and most visible in Abaco and Eleuthera.

¶12. (U) Haitians are scattered throughout inner-city Nassau neighborhoods, where Bahamian landlords rent modest homes to migrants, legal or not. Less well-off Haitians cluster in several areas in the interior where neat, working-class subdivisions now encroach on makeshift migrant settlements that originally sprang up in the distant bush. Still (relatively) remote agricultural areas in the southwestern part of the island are also dotted with rudimentary structures, home to Haitian agricultural laborers and small-scale fruit-and-vegetable producers and sellers.

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&HAITIAN8 WORK -- NOT FOR NATIVES  
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¶13. (U) The frequency of migrant employment in certain fields gave rise over time to the concept of &Haitian work8 -- that is, jobs Bahamians do not or will not do. Farming, in particular, is a field native Bahamians appear to have all but abandoned, with 90-95 percent of food in stores imported, most of that from Florida and elsewhere in the U.S. The country's food import tab is estimated at about 500 million dollars annually.

¶14. (U) Yet local farmers complain that immigration policy prevents them from importing the Haitian laborers needed to make domestic farming price-competitive, and increase production and national self-sufficiency in food. In many ways, as more astute analysts recognize, the Bahamian economy is just as reliant on this low-end foreign labor source as it is on high-end, expatriate labor in tourism or finance. Whether society as a whole agrees is doubtful.

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LIVING CONDITIONS POOR, OPTIONS LIMITED  
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¶15. (U) According to studies, the Haitian community in The Bahamas is characterized by high poverty, high unemployment, poor educational achievement, and poor health conditions. It is also burdened by social stigma the majority Bahamian population attaches to these conditions and undocumented status.

¶16. (U) Without papers and confined to low-income jobs, many Haitians live in ramshackle and unsanitary shantytowns with limited water, utilities or other necessary infrastructure. These are generally &no-go8 areas for Bahamians, including it appears, government officials -- with the exception of periodic immigration raids or emergency services, in particular fire. Residents of such areas in New Providence, Abaco -- the notorious Mud and Pigeon Pea settlements in Marsh Harbour -- and elsewhere appear to face the most limited opportunities for integration or social advancement.

¶17. (U) Haitian migrants generally have access to government social services, including education, but inequities and discrimination persist in wider society. Add to this mix the difficulties in securing citizenship, residence, or work documents, and it is no wonder that the Haitian community is poorly integrated into Bahamian society at large.

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BAHAMIAN8 FEAR: &THE HAITIAN8 ARE COMING8  
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¶18. (U) Anti-Haitian prejudice, and resentment against further immigration, is common in Bahamian society. Bahamians often express fears of being &taken over8 by migrants from poorer Caribbean countries, Haiti in the first place, and bemoan the &Creolization8 of their culture. For example, while a few radiostations carry weekly Haitian

music shows or occasionally air Creole ads aimed at the Haitian community, Bahamians react negatively to such broadcasts and point to them as proof of their fears.

¶19. (U) Reflecting the sentiments of most Bahamians, the Minister of Immigration also said in Parliament in March that he did not wish to wake up one morning and find out that we Bahamians are outnumbered in our own country.<sup>8</sup> He criticized Bahamian employers willing to hire illegal immigrants, usually low-skilled laborers from Haiti or Jamaica. Both supply and demand must be constrained if word is to get back to those places where illegals come from that it is no longer possible for illegal migrants to obtain employment and find housing if they are illegal,<sup>8</sup> the minister said, defending his agency's record of vigorous enforcement.

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ENFORCEMENT -- UP  
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¶20. (C) In this climate, strict enforcement policies are popular with the public. The previous Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) administration (2002-2007) sought to take advantage of this reality with harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric and ill-conceived raids, for example those targeting Haitians on Eleuthera in 2006. The PLP policy back-fired, according to some, as voters of Haitian extraction in several inner-city Nassau constituencies (reportedly) switched allegiances to the Free National Movement (FNM) in the May 2007 elections, helping deliver a surprise victory. Now, the shoe is on the other foot, and the FNM government appears to have adopted a more aggressive approach to immigration. A government reshuffle in July 2008 brought a new, politically ambitious Minister of Immigration and a top-level shake-up to this sensitive and high-profile portfolio (ref B).

¶21. (C) Since assuming office, the new Minister and even newer immigration officials, supported by Prime Minister Ingraham, have stressed ramped-up enforcement coupled with intensified public outreach, including grass-roots cooperation to identify illegal migrants through a Crime-Stoppers<sup>8</sup> collaboration. Officials also stressed increasing government revenue through review of work permit procedures, which are sometimes suspect, to make sure Bahamians were not disadvantaged in favor of foreigners. These measures coincided, inauspiciously for the Haitian community, with the sharpening economic downturn last fall (ref C).

¶22. (SBU) A series of high-profile raids significantly raised the visibility of new immigration officials appointed after the leadership restructuring, with the opposition criticizing the minister for grandstanding. Yet such raids, like one on the famous downtown straw market, where foreign-born peddlers of cheap knock-off goods have all but displaced Bahamian handicrafts vendors, are regarded favorably by Bahamians regardless of party affiliation.

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HUMAN RIGHTS CRITICISM -- ALSO UP  
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¶23. (SBU) A large-scale action on Eleuthera Island in early February, on the other hand, drew familiar criticism on human rights grounds. The apprehension of around 200 illegal migrants -- men, women, and children -- also led to negative comparisons with similar, but badly-handled raids under the PLP administration in 2006. The minister defended his actions, pointing out that only a small number of apprehended persons brought to New Providence were subsequently released upon confirmation of their legal status in the country. That is, the vast majority were found to be illegal and subject to repatriation; whereas the opposite happened in 2006, when the vast majority of apprehended persons were found to have legal status.

¶24. (SBU) In addition, human rights groups sharply criticized conditions at the immigration detention center,

leading to an international outcry to which the GCOB responded with improvements in living conditions and recreation options (ref D). Haitian groups remained pointedly silent on the issue, reflecting the revolving-door reality of Haitian immigration and repatriation, which makes living conditions at the center a secondary concern.

¶25. (C) It also reflects the community's predilection to remain in the background except on cultural and humanitarian issues, such as hurricane aid or burying unidentified victims of periodic maritime tragedies. The Haitian ambassador's mooted plans to organize the community to lobby the GCOB more vigorously has apparently fizzled, possibly another victim of the economic downturn (ref E). And while the savvy minister has occasionally extended an olive branch to the Haitian community, the GCOB stress is clearly now on apprehension and repatriation. With bipartisan and widespread public support, vigorous immigration enforcement will continue, as GCOB officials at all levels have indicated.

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PRIME MINISTER TO IMMIGRATION OFFICERS: TREAT PEOPLE FAIRLY  
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¶26. (C) Recently, Prime Minister Ingraham weighed in on immigration once again at the agency's inaugural &customer service8 convention, another novelty of the new leadership. Surprisingly, Ingraham sharply and publicly took the much-maligned service to task for widely perceived inefficiency and corruption. He also directly criticized its treatment -- not of Haitians -- but of Jamaican citizens coming to The Bahamas.

¶27. (SBU) The Prime Minister's tongue-lashing appeared aimed primarily at corrupt or lackadaisical immigration officers. But Ingraham also responded to criticism of authorities, treatment of migrants in its custody. While his remarks were welcome acknowledgment of the need for fair and humane official treatment of foreigners, they are unlikely to affect GCOB policy or ingrained Bahamian attitudes toward Haitians.

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TOLERANCE OF HAITIANS -- DOWN  
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¶28. (C) Bahamians strongly resent the social cost, cultural impact, and crime linked -- in popular stereotypes certainly -- to Haitian immigration. These sentiments are confirmed in contacts with government officials, political activists, especially the youth, and NGO leaders who interact with both communities. Haitians are thought to impose disproportionate demands on inadequate social services, primarily health and education, due to the higher birth rate in the Haitian community. In Abaco, for example, nearly a third of students in government schools are Haitian, whereas the figure for Nassau is around 12.5 percent, and both figures are far higher than the proportion of Haitians in the overall population (according to 2002, 2005 official statistics).

¶29. (U) Available data do not support all widely-held assumptions about the Bahamian-Haitian community, however. Despite the perception of poor, young Haitians with large families &taking over8, household size figures are not appreciably different (2000 census results). Despite a higher birthrate, the Haitian community is on average older than the Bahamian community (likely due to more single, mobile laborers), and receives social benefits at a rate far lower than the lowest estimated share of the population. The unemployment rate in the Haitian community, on the other hand, is very high -- double that of society at large -- while earnings are far lower, less than a third the national median (2002 figures). That poor situation has likely deteriorated during the last year of economic downturn.

¶30. (C) Haitian (and other) migrants are also often scapegoats for spiraling crime and drug-related violence, which still may be on the rise from an already high level, in part due to the same current economic hardships. Yet prison statistics show that the vast majority of criminals are in



fact Bahamian, as government officials periodically emphasize. Privately, GCOB officials laud the educational successes of immigrant Haitian children compared to their Bahamian peers, tending to confirm the claims of Haitian activists that newcomers are motivated to better themselves and can achieve -- if given the chance.

¶31. (C) Despite what anecdotal evidence and the (possibly outdated) statistics may reveal, observers feel that societal tolerance for immigrants is decreasing from an already low benchmark due to economic stresses, exacerbating widely-held, ingrained anti-Haitian prejudices.

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HAITIAN COMMUNITY -- ANXIOUS, FEARFUL  
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¶32. (C) The Haitian community, for its part, is fearful about enforcement and anxious about the economic future. Representatives in Nassau and Freeport are resentful of longstanding discriminatory treatment at the hands of officials and ordinary Bahamians alike. They are also disappointed by the GCOB's renewed emphasis on enforcement, despite occasional conciliatory gestures.

¶33. (C) One Haitian activist in Freeport caused a minor media sensation in May after accusing the government of responsibility for the death of a Haitian man, who was killed in the Dominican Republic in unclear circumstances after being denied asylum in The Bahamas. The activist accused the government of ignoring its international obligations and trampling the rights of vulnerable migrants. While there are no known incidents of lynching of Haitians in The Bahamas, as reported in the Dominican Republic recently, potential flashpoints remain.

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RISK OF CONFLICT -- ELEVATED, AND RISING  
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¶34. (C) Both government officials and non-government activists in Nassau confirm the enduring resentments and fret about the possibility of ethnic conflict in the future. Rising economic hardship and unemployment, and more immigration raids, when coupled with reduced societal tolerance for outsiders competing for a shrinking economic pie, prepares a recipe for increased Haitian-Bahamian tensions going forward. Observers fear that if the downturn continues or sharpens through the coming year, as now appears likely, or illegal immigration increases further, the risk of ethnic flare-ups will also rise commensurately. Inner-city Nassau neighborhoods are most at risk, but the potential for conflict also exists in suburbs where new subdivisions encroach on existing migrant settlements. Conflict is also possible in outlying islands, which are proportionately greater affected by demographic changes or economic deterioration, and the competition for scarce land and jobs is fiercer.

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MIGRATION -- INEVITABLE, ALSO TO U.S.  
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¶35. (SBU) The Haitian problem in The Bahamas is not new. Economic prosperity and jobs drew immigrants over the decades, from all over the Caribbean, and especially from Haiti. Migrants continue to arrive even as economic conditions here deteriorate -- as they are even worse at home. Even in these bad times, few Haitians are likely to return to their homeland. More likely, recent arrivals will seek to move on to the U.S. through well-established smuggling and other channels. Old-timers, and their children, are less likely to follow, guaranteeing further social tensions in the future. If U.S. policy on Haitians were to change significantly, however, Bahamian-Haitian intent may also shift accordingly.

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LABOR A NECESSITY, INTEGRATION A CHALLENGE  
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¶36. (SBU) The challenges for the GCOB will remain, regardless of economic fluctuations, as long as integration proceeds slowly. Paradoxically, even economic improvement in the medium-term is unlikely to change the long-term situation for the better. It is precisely the demand for cheap labor that draws Haitian migrant workers in the first place, leading to social and cultural tensions. That demand may now be depressed, but it will only increase as foreign investment and economic activity, at some point, gather steam once again. The country's Haitian minority, long in the making, is here to stay.

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COMMENT  
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¶37. (C) The existence of a large, dissatisfied and poorly-integrated ethnic minority is a potential risk to social and political stability in The Bahamas. A well-organized community might already have the power to swing a close election and wield increased influence as a result. Haitians in The Bahamas, however, do not appear as yet to have the will or organizational wherewithal to risk an open challenge to the status quo. Instead, most prefer to seek integration in place while others move on to the U.S. The GCOB would be well-served to encourage integration, as some commentators recognize, both to diffuse existing animosities and avoid future manifestations of discontent. In the short term, given the economic and social pressures, GCOB anti-immigration policy is unlikely to change. As a result, well-entrenched Haitian communities are barely tolerated and the risk of ethnic flare-ups rises in proportion to economic hardship and stricter immigration enforcement. The possibility of overt inter-ethnic violence persists.

ZUNIGA-BROWN